DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 306 549 CS 009 647

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TITLE Dick and Jane Are Dead: Basal Reader Takes a Back Seat to Student Writings.
INSTITUTION Appalachia Educational Lab., Charleston, W. Va.
SPONS AGENCY Office of Educational Research and Improvement (ED), Washington, DC.
PUB DATE May 89
CONTRACT 400-86-0001
NOTE 22p.; Revised version of a paper presented at an Appalachian Educational Laboratory Symposium (Louisville, KY, December 4-5, 1988).
AVAILABLE FROM Appalachia Educational Laboratory, Inc., P.O. Box 1348, Charleston, WV 25325 ($3.50, prepaid).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150) -- Reports - Descriptive (141)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Basal Reading; *Beginning Reading; Class Activities; Grade 2; *Language Experience Approach; Primary Education; Reading Attitudes; *Reading Instruction; Reading Writing Relationship; Regional Characteristics; Rural Environment; *Rural Schools; *Student Developed Materials
IDENTIFIERS Appalachia; *Beginning Writing; Reading Motivation

ABSTRACT

A second grade teacher in a rural Appalachian school draws heavily on familiar regional literature and the children's own rich mountain heritage and culture to teach reading to her students, covering the required basal readings in only one day per week. Students use the basals on Mondays and retell the texts on paper. They spend the rest of the week writing stories, reading them, and sharing them with other students. Every week they have a real radio show where they read and tell their own stories, sing songs, and ask their listeners to write them letters. By the end of the year they have written 11 different kinds of stories, as well as articles, letters, plays, books, and puppet shows. All the stories are collected in a storybook which is retained as an example for next year's students. Students keep track of their own progress by referring to a list of essential reading skills inside their individual reading folders. The most important benefit of this approach is that student motivation to read is high, unlike the low motivation which accompanied the purely basal reader approach. Every student in the teacher's class is reading avidly, none is failing, and absenteeism is down. (RS)

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Dick and Jane are Dead: Basal Reader Takes a Back Seat to Student Writings

By
Linda Oxendine

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This publication is based on work sponsored wholly or in part by the Office of Educational Research and Improvement, U.S. Department of Education, under contract number 400-86-0001. Its contents do not necessarily reflect the views of OERI, the Department, or any other agency of the U. S. Government.

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Dick and Jane are Dead: Basal Reader Takes a Back Seat to Student Writings

by Linda Oxendine

May 1989

This paper contains a revised transcript of a presentation by Linda Oxendine at a symposium, "Risky Futures: Should State Policy Reflect Rural Diversity?," sponsored by AEL's Policy and Planning Center on December 4-5, 1988, in Louisville, Kentucky. Ms. Oxendine is a second grade teacher at G.R. Hampton Elementary School in Knox County, Kentucky, and a member of the Eastern Kentucky Teachers' Network.

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Dick and Jane are Dead

Basal Reader Takes a Back Seat to Student Writings

I want to show you something. I brought one of my most prized possessions with me today: A basal reader!! This is a MacMillan reader. It's called Secrets and Surprises, and it's a third-grade basal reader. My sister teaches in Florida. She took the story that begins on page 186 to her principal and said, "I do not want to teach this story," and she told him why. And he said, "Well, I'm sorry but it's in the book and you have to teach it." So, I'm going to share some of this story with you. Then you can understand why my sister Dora Susan--named after my two grandmothers--felt so strongly against this particular selection.

By the way, there are some articles about Appalachia in basal readers today: coal mining, broom making, and Granny's quilts, and there's a story called "Daniel's Duck". It's about a little boy who carves a duck he isn't satisfied with. Those are the only stories that I have found in today's basal readers that even barely resemble us.

This story, written by Lawrence Swinburne, is being read by children all across the United States and in many foreign countries. Thousands of children daily are reading this story in MacMillan's Secrets and Surprises. The story begins with a little girl and her father who have left the mountains and moved to a city. He's looking for better work and a better life. Now I'll read some of it to you.

> One day a new girl came to Rosie's class. "I think your name is Laura," said Mrs. Rogers. "Is that correct?" "Yes. Yes so, ma'am", said the girl. "But my folks back home call

me Laurie." And the kids in the class didn't know quite what to make of Laurie. Her ways were different. Some of the kids laughed at her, and others stayed away from her. "I know the others think I'm funny," said Laurie. "I don't talk like them, and I don't know the answers to all the questions the teacher asks. But I've been living back in the hills and people don't go to school much there." "Aren't there any schools in the hills," said Rosie. "There are," said Laurie. "But Daddy didn't like to send us too much because sometimes we didn't have shoes or the right clothes to wear. Daddy came to the city, you know, to get work and try to change his luck." And then she even goes as far as to say: "I wish I could talk like you!"

And then on over in the story, the kids make the comment that they thought Laurie would never learn. They thought she would never catch up. And it just keeps on going. It's really bad. She can't count money. The pictures/illustrations in this story are as degrading as the words themselves. She's got long, stringy hair--real unkempt; a homemade dress with ric rac trim. They go to this place called Pioneer State Park, and Laurie doesn't have the $3 that it takes to go on this field trip. So she babysits and sells pop bottles. But she brings her money to school and she has more than $3 because she cannot count. And when they get to Pioneer State Park, there's some remarkable things that Laurie sees there--very remarkable things that make me know that Lawrence Swinburne has never set foot in the hills or the mountains anywhere, except maybe in a dream.

The first thing they saw was a woman spinning on a spinning wheel. Remember, this is a modern day setting, and these things are supposed to be common today occurrences. Laurie says, "Why she's making cloth like we used to back home." And then they saw candles being made and Laurie said, "We did that a lot but I never liked that too much, though." And then there was a man making a broom. And Laurie says, "Boy, that makes me homesick to watch him do that. We used to make brooms like that back home out of a special kind of cornstalk." And then they find Mountain Laurel and chicory growing in this place, and Laurie says they made coffee out of chicory back home every day.

Next, they got lost. I knew this would happen because this story had to have a Granny Clampett-hero ending. Did you feel that coming, too? While they were lost, Laurie takes her shoe string and a safety pin, and she catches two fish and cooks them. The girls even say that's the best fish they've ever tasted. Before she fixes the fish, she rubs two sticks together and "had a fire going in no time at all!" Now that's scientifically impossible. Finally, they do the only sensible thing that's believable in this story. They follow a stream--downstream--until they eventually come out of the woods, and there's a park ranger. And the park ranger says, "You're a smart girl. You know a lot about the woods." And Laurie says, "It's nothing much to know when you've been brought up in the woods. It's easy. Folks that don't know woods, though, they have a pretty hard time." And then the little girls looked at each other and they remarked, "I guess being good at adding doesn't show if someone's smart or not." And then they changed their minds about their friend.

Now if that's a positive image of Appalachia, then I'm a man and not a woman. This is garbage!!! The MacMillan series is not what I use in my classroom.

I use HBJ. Most of you, I'm sure, know what that is. It's directed silent reading, which in a way, is even worse than this. The children read a page, and you wait for them to finish that page. Then you ask them five questions. Then you let them read the next page and wait until they're through and then ask five more questions. That is a crazy way of teaching reading. I use the basal reader because it's expected of me, and I use it one day a week--on Mondays. But on that one day, I can get everything accomplished that I am required to do for an entire week. The children read the story silently and retell the story on paper as if they were at home talking to Mom or to Granny. Once they have rewritten a basal story, we call it a Story Report. After reading their work, I know if they've comprehended well. I know if they've gotten the main ideas in the right order, and that's about all the basal reader is after. Well, during the rest of the week we have fun. But before I talk to you about that, I want to make some statements that I feel are important ones to make.

I got up at 5:30 this morning to drive up here. It was a sort of a last minute thing. It's a wonderful opportunity. I've never talked to this many people before. But as you can tell, I'm not the least bit shy. I guess I take that from my Dad. I do teach one college course, so I guess that qualifies me as a college professor adjunct, whatever that means. The course is called History of Appalachia, and it is offered to

all students. It is a requirement for education majors at Union College in Barbourville, Kentucky, my hometown.

I live at Swan Pond. Swan Pond was first discovered by Thomas Walker and later named by Daniel Boone. Dr. Thomas Walker walked right through my front yard before he crossed the Cumberland River and built that historical cabin. So you know how I feel about culture, and community, and heritage.

We all agree that our children here in the Appalachian Mountains have to stop failing in school. They need successes, and they need plenty of them, so they'll stay in school and later earn a living or maybe continue their education after they graduate from high school. When children fail to learn reading skills in the early primary grades, they begin to gradually slip through the cracks, and they're gone by age 16. Knox County has one of the highest illiteracy rates in the nation. According to the last Census Report, over 50 percent of the people--the adults--in my county, have not finished the 6th grade. And over 50 percent of our local high school students drop out before they graduate. We have problems like this--similar problems--in all of our rural areas I'm sure, all across America. The more traditional basal reading material that we use in the class (or that we're expected to use in the classroom) doesn't work for Mountain children. And I'm not sure if it works well for any children.

Are we running daylight detention camps? Are we trying to produce little Xerox copies of Dick and Jane? Is that what we're trying to do in our mountain schools or in our rural schools? Are we teaching the

children to appreciate their heritage, their culture, and their dialect? Our children speak with the same beautiful dialect or poetic form of language that ballad collectors and linguists have sat on front porches and collected for years with great enthusiasm. Are we butchering this dialect? Or are we using it or treating it as a skill, and then adding standard English as an extension to that skill? Are the teachers in the Appalachian schools the ones that are pushing the children out instead of them dropping out on their own? We know the only way for children to feel important and successful is to help them to build their self-esteem, and help them to establish an identity. And the only way to do this is to teach them the importance of their rich, mountain heritage and culture. Are our children dropping out of school? Are they really dropping out, or are they not able to adapt or adjust to our middle class surburban/urban approach to teaching education--the methods we were taught in our higher educational institutions.

I put a lot of blame on colleges and universities. I really do. And that's why I'm teaching History of Appalachia at Union College. Those student teachers are learning to take that knowledge of culture and heritage and use it daily in the classroom right along beside the basal reader. Right along beside the other textbooks. Why not show the best of both worlds?

What Am I Doing In The Classsroom?

Well, the gentleman that came before us today said that Eliot Wiggington's students write real stories about real people for real money. Well, that's what my children do in the second grade. Only we go

a little further than that. Every Thursday morning on WYWY, we have a real radio show. And boy, does that connect you with the community. My students write their own scripts and everything. And everybody's included. They tell stories and read stories that they've written during reading class. They talk about their fears, things they like, and things that they don't like. Also, they sing mountain music and ask their listeners to write them letters. We get letters almost every day, and many times these letters are written in cursive, but the children are extremely motivated to learn to read these letters.

What I hope to accomplish most of all is to help children become more competent readers and to help them develop a sense of pride in those things that they can identify with. Yes, my students do write their own reading material. Their stories are about school, family, their community, recent and past events, problems that they face, and their life in the mountains. Through this writing and reading language approach, I already know the vast progress children can make. The text that my students use is just simply their own words written down. We call it sometimes "Experience Stories" or "My Stories." They write about baptizings, planting gardens, feeding chickens, picking blackberries, catching lightning bugs, and many of those things that we've all enjoyed doing as children--that they still enjoy doing.

At the beginning of the year, I transcribe for those that cannot write on their own. Then I read the story back to them, and they return to their desk with their story, reading it silently. When everyone is finished, they share their stories aloud with their classmates and me;

and we listen with great interest because it is our history, our heritage, and it is about us.

High interest-level teaching? Yes, it is. Effective teaching? Yes, it is!! The children not only read their stories everyday, but they swap and read each other's stories. And there's a big classroom display. Every Friday we put our favorite stories on the wall. At first, yes, some of them are reading from memory. But through daily writing and reading and sharing they begin to recognize and remember words and their speaking vocabulary increases their reading vocabulary daily at a much faster rate than any basal reader could ever do. Their reading is rich with meaning and fun. They illustrate their stories, too. The children I work with are natural storytellers. Aren't all children natural storytellers and natural artists?

As the year progresses, I can see a big difference, and their reading and writing ability fascinates me. They write articles, letters, plays, books, and puppet shows with little or no difficulty. Spelling and punctuation may not be perfect, but that's alright. I don't correct anything at the start. The students spell phonetically, and they know what they've mispelled. After we finish writing the stories each day, we make a list of all the words they know they've mispelled, and those words are put on the chalkboard. Is that in isolation? No, it's not. It's taken right out of the story. It's not flash card drilling, either. Those are words they want to learn how to spell, and those words are put in story spellers each child has. The story spellers are used everyday alongside the writing of their stories. So the problem of all those

mispelled words takes care of itself. As they learn those skills of punctuation and capitalization, which they're learning now, all of that takes care of itself, too. The children want their stories to be as perfect as possible because it's just an extension of themselves. It's their property.

During the year, you can write about yourself just so much, and then you run out of things to say. So next, the children begin to learn other types of stories. They write about the experiences of other people: like their fathers and mothers, or mammaws. They learn 11 different kinds of stories by the end of the year. Last year at the end of the year, my students put together a classroom book called "The Man In the Walnut Shell." It's a little guy that's born when a big walnut shell hits a rock on the ground and splits wide open, as they call it. He's already 57 years old, but he's a little man, and he's young to them. Then he travels, and he experiences many wonderful things. The children divided into groups and they worked Nancy-Drew-and-the-Hardy-Boys style. Each little group wrote a different adventure of his life. When he got to be 87 years old, he decided he wanted to get married and settle down because he was afraid he might get sick and need someone to take care of him. He had two of his own children: Pride and Joy. He died eventually of a heart attack, and the family was all grieving and sorry that he was gone. Then his children took his place in life. The element of hope is in that story, and the idea for this story came from a book called Yonder.

The Appalachian literature that I bought for my classroom came from a grant that I got from Foxfire last year. Weekly Reader sent us 500

hardbound books this year, an award we won through writing to "U.S. Kids" magazine. This is a new magazine that Weekly Reader started last year. As soon as I looked through it, I discovered that it didn't have anything about mountain people. So, I began to send a lot of the children's stories to them. Louis Parker, the editor, called me at school. He was very interested in what I was doing in the classroom and wanted to come for a visit. He said he only had an hour or so to spend before he had to return a rental car and catch a flight to Middletown, Connecticut. So we went up the head of Stone Cove hollow and met the Carr family. He liked Jenny Carr's story about the rattlesnake skin. That hour turned into all day. Once the father and mother started telling stories and the children began to sing and clog for him, he realized that he was sitting on a goldmine. An article about Jenny Carr and her family will be featured in an upcoming issue of "U.S. Kids." When I took him to my classroom he said, "Your books are fairly worn out." I said, "Well, my daughter Molly is 13 now, and these are the stories I read to her when she was a little girl. They're getting worn out because, you know, they don't last forever." He said, "What about your school library?" I said, "Well, it's on down the hall pretty far and the children are only allowed to be in there for a half an hour once a week." So he said, "Well, I'm going to send you some books." So we got 500 books and that's the biggest award I have received in my life.

Money from the Foxfire grant put together our book, called Terrific Mountain Tales. It is totally done by the children. After Christmas, they begin to edit their own work and help each other get their stories

ready for print. Everything in this book was done by the children, and I want to read some of these stories to you. I wish I had some children here today, but this is too far for them to travel. Anytime you want to come to G. R. Hampton Elementary in Knox County, Kentucky, you're welcome in my classroom. We do this every morning--except for Monday--from 9:30 to 11:05 a.m.. This one's called "Granny's Bun," and it's by Jennifer Woodlee, who is 8 years old.

> I've always wanted to know how Granny got her hair up in a bun. Last Friday night I stayed at Granny's house. Early Saturday morning I got to watch her do it. First, she combed her long, gray-white hair that reached down her back. She combed a long time. Next, she put a bunch of pins in her lap, then she bent over and combed it wrong side out. She raised back up and put her hair in her hands. She pulled up on the hair next to her neck. Then she wrapped it and the rest of her hair around and around making a bun. Last, she put in lots of hairpins to keep the bun from falling down. Guess what Granny did next? She put my red hair up in a bun just like hers. P.S. Granny had red hair, too, when she was a little girl.

This one's called "My Family's Music". This is by Jenny Carr, age 8. This is the same child that will be featured in the "U.S. Kids" magazine.

> My Mom plays music. It's not rock 'n roll music. It's country music. Every year we go to Carter Caves to

do our music there. My Mom plays the dulcimer, banjo, sometimes the guitar, and the lumberjack doll. I play the washboard and sing songs, too. My sister, Joy, plays the ukulele and she sings songs, too. Joy also plays the dulcimer. My Daddy plays the guitar. Do you know why we do all of this? We do it because it's part of our musical heritage, and it's a whole lot of fun.

The next story is called "The Coal Mine." If I ask my children how many of them have a family member who works in the coal mine or any job affiliated with the coal mine, everyone would raise their hand. I was surprised this year when I asked my children how many of them had a family member who milked a cow, and at least half of them raised their hand. That should tell you what kind of special group I have this year.

"The Coal Mine" by Junior Engle, age 8.

There's a road that goes up by my house. One day my Dad and I went up there to see the coal mine. But when you go up there, please bring an adult. It is very dangerous to go there alone. In the morning we went up there to invite the men down for dinner. (He's talking about lunch.) We had soup beans and fried chicken. The men thanked my Mom for the good meal. They told me I could stay there all day, but my Mom told me I couldn't go without my Daddy. My Daddy agreed to go with me. So the next day me and Daddy went up there. There was a hole dug in the mountain. There were men in there on their knees

digging coal. They even gave me a cap for being a good boy. I think I want to be a coal miner when I grow up.

"Coon Hunting". Many of my boys have gone coon hunting. It's not been a gift that the girls have received yet. I never got to go myself, and I've always wanted to. I had a person come to my college class and talk about coon hunting, and snake remedies, and show his arrowheads.

"Coon Hunting" by Gary Burnette, age 8.

Sometimes my Dad and I go coon hunting. We take our coon dog, Homer, with us. We have to wear coveralls to keep us warm. We take our rifle and shells, too. Also we bring a flashlight because you have to go coon hunting after dark. I'm never afraid of the dark. We build a fire on top of the mountain and wait. Homer starts barking when he picks up a scent of a coon. Then, he goes crazy. If he trees one, we hear them and we run to kill the coon. If we kill it, we can skin it. I hear some people wear coon fur coats. You know, coon's short for raccoon.

"Mammaw's Cow" by Brian Bunch, age 8.

Mammaw and her cow are fun to watch. One day I went with my Mammaw to milk her cow. First, she had this big bucket with her. Then she gets the cow to be still. Most people have to feed their cow while they milk, but not Granny. Her cow is real tame. Then she squats down and puts the bucket under the cow, and begins to milk. She

has to pull and squeeze, and pull and squeeze many, many times before she's finished. She tried to squirt me one day, but she missed!

This is the last one. "Lightning Bugs" by Timmy Johnson, age 8.

In the summer I like to catch lightning bugs. I have to wait till it's dark to look for them. You know, they're little bugs that have little lights. You have to wait till the little light comes on before you can catch them. It's slow work, but it's a lot of fun. I have to run in the garden, and through the weeds, and all around the house. I use a jar to put them in. Later, when I'm in my room, I turn the lights out, and I use my lightning bug lamp.

Every story in their storybook is great! I have tried to read those that touch upon some different aspects of Appalachian life. There are stories in here that are fascinating. There are stories being written every day, except for Monday. "My First Fish"--I know you can remember the first one you caught. That's a wonderful story. Can you remember the first time you cut your own hair? That's the kind of stuff we write about in the classroom. And that's what the children learn to read. "Sunday Dinner at Granny's." Does that ring any bells? There's a lot of stories like that being written each day.

Now the thing that I don't do in the writing process: I DO NOT tell the children what to write about. They brainstorm story ideas, I write them on the board, and they select what they want to write about. They learn that reading is just talking, written down. Then they look at the

basal reader and realize that is someone else's talking written down. The whole reading process begins to make better sense to them. But this year, not only do they write 11 different stories, but they learn to read the poetic lyrics of mountain songs.

I learned to play the dulcimer a few years ago. The children have learned 20 songs already this year. They not only learn to sing them, they learn all the words in these songs. Songs like "Crawdad Hole", and "Cumberland Gap," and "Liza Jane," and "Little Mohee". "The Little Birdie Song" is a song that I teach them that my Aunt Hazel taught me. I've never seen that song written anywhere else. It's just a song that someone hasn't collected yet. "Get Along Home Cindy, and "Go tell Aunt Rodey", "The Old Woman and Her Pig," "Gentleman Frog and Lady Mouse," (three different versions of that), and "Over the River to Feed My Sheep," and many other songs. Last year at the end of the year, we even had a folk festival. The children and I had the opportunity to sing four of these songs before a large audience of parents and teachers. I'll never forget the performance as long as I live. I had to stop playing at one point and just listen. The children were fascinating, and anyone who was there will never forget it.

What are My Objectives in the Classroom?

This is what I try to get out of my reading program every day.

Reinforce and develop progressive mastery in the essential skills. Yes, it can be done. A list of the second grade essential skills is kept in each child's folder. They have a folder that has every essential skill they need to master. They also have a picture of themselves inside that

folder, and also all of their stories are included there. They keep track of their own progress. This is the most valuable evaluation tool that I have.

I feel the most important thing is to build motivation. When I used only the basal reader, I had to force my children to read. They were not interested in reading. They drug their feet on the way back from gym and said, "Do we have to read today?" The motivation now is 100% because they're reading what they want to read.

Self-awareness. They're very aware of who they are because their stories reflect, like a mirror, their way of life.

Pride. Overflowing with it.

Self-esteem. They feel like they're worth a million dollars. I don't tell them that. They know that by watching everyone's reactions to their stories.

Hands-on-experiences. Gosh, aren't those stories they write every day nothing but hands-on?

Opportunities for brainstorming. That's an objective. Yes, we do that every day and in other classes, too.

Student choice and planning. Continuously, especially with the radio show.

Peer teaching. Constantly. Everyone knows that some children can't work as well as the person sitting beside them. They teach each other as much as I teach them.

Showcase individual creativity through story sharing with peers and other primary classes. They go to the first grade class; they've been

helping those children--the ones that I'll have next year--learn to write stories, so that I won't have to spend the first six weeks getting to know those children. Also, they write stories with the students I had last year. We go to their 3rd grade classroom. My students know what to expect next year.

Developing responsibility and a sense of challenge. This is constantly going on in our classroom.

End product. The storybook--it was the icing on the cake and a long-term goal. The radio show is a weekly end product.

The storybook written by my last year's class is used every day in my classroom now. They know if these children could do it, they can, too. Listening tapes also accompany the book. We bought audio equipment and cassette tapes. Every one of these stories is read by the child that wrote it. My slower achievers have those head sets on their heads as soon as they get in the room from gym. And as soon as reading class starts, they listen for awhile, and then they write. This is the best idea that has ever come out of my classroom. And it was not my idea. It was the children's idea. The radio show was the children's idea, too.

Familiar Material Develops a Love for Reading--and More

Children develop a greater love for reading when they can hear and read about people like themselves. Appalachian literature mixed with a child's own storytelling talents produces a story writing and reading ability that leaves me in awe. Children never get bored while listening to mountain stories. They never tire from writing stories, either. When a child gets this kind of start, they're soon reading and writing like

crazy. Every child in my room is reading right now. Every single one of them is reading. And there's a couple of them that can probably read as well as I do. This is the best way to teach: basal, one day a week; let them write their own the rest of the time.

Appalachian literature is being read in my classroom. Yes, they do read books by other authors. They're all over the room. Five hundred plus the ones I bought for my daughter Molly when she was little. They read those for half an hour in the afternoon. My students either read what someone else has written, or they write their own. Everyone in my classroom feels great, they smile, they don't miss school. I had seven children absent last month. Only seven. Yes, their attendance has improved. And no one is failing. And as it looks right now, no one will fail at the end of this school year. Everyone has made tremendous progress.

Dick and Jane are dead. Let's begin anew.